ZECHARIAH AND ELIZABETH
December 3, 2006

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 25:1–10
Luke 1:5–25

"'How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man,
and my wife is getting on in years.'"
Luke 1:18 (NRSV)

Lighting our candles, we see ourselves again as dwelling in darkness.
Despite all the lights and noise of Christmas commerce, the world is cold and in need.
God is not here. Not yet, not enough. . . . Why again these candles and ritualized longing? After all this time would not existential resignation be more honest and ennobling? . . .
And then sometimes, some blessed times, we have worked in us such Advent alchemy
that our own hearts stir to feel the stirring of God. Not yet so powerful,
not yet quite visible, but more, we think, than just imagined.
While the sky appears opaque and silent, seeds quicken in the dark soil.
A child stirs in the womb.

John Stendahl
"Living by the Word,"
Meditations from the *Christian Century*

As days shorten and darkness comes earlier, we gather, O God,
for the light that is coming into the world.
We come to hear the story again,
to sing the hymns and light the candles.
Startle us with the story's newness.
Open our eyes and ears to the grace and love all around us.
And awaken in us renewed faith
to welcome and to follow our Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.

At this time of year, it is not simple to know how to be a church in this place. Today is the first Sunday in Advent, the four-week period before

Christmas during which the Christian church for centuries has turned its attention and energy to getting ready for the great day. Unlike what is happening outside, that process of preparing for Christmas inside the church has traditionally been a matter of slowing down, taking a deep breath, looking backward at our history and inward to the recesses of our own hearts and souls to get ourselves ready for the great event we will celebrate four weeks from now.

The challenge here is that the holiday celebration began weeks ago—before Halloween, actually—when the first seasonal decorations started to appear in the windows and counters of our retail neighbors. And it began officially on Saturday, November 18, at 6:00 p.m., when Mickey Mouse, leading the Michigan Avenue Festival of Lights parade, high on the first Disney float, gave the signal and someone flipped the switch and all the tiny lights came on up and down the Magnificent Mile, transforming a gray November evening into a virtual wonderland. November 18—a full two weeks before Advent and six weeks before Christmas, and we took our customary deep breath, sang Christmas carols on the front steps as the parade crowd gathered, served hot cider, sold some Christmas cards, and best of all put the Electric Sheep out in their Garth pasture to begin quietly grazing and, in a feat of technical precision, Leszek Pytka and his House Staff turned them on just as all the other lights were illumined. Nobody much notices that accomplishment, but we take a lot of pride in it around here.

And then the day after Thanksgiving, Black Friday, the occasion when our retail merchant neighbors turn their sails into a fresh wind and head toward a record year-end bottom line, a day distinguished this year by store openings at 12:01 a.m. and riots at assorted shopping malls as frenzied shoppers fought security officers, clerks, managers, and one another to get to the new PlayStation 3. We can help. We can help with your shopping issues right here, with the Fair Trade Gift Bazaar in Anderson Hall. Please pay special attention to the wonderful Christmas cards created by children in our Tutoring program. All the proceeds go to that important outreach ministry. And I trust there will be a minimum of pushing and shoving and no riot. It's neither easy nor simple to know how to be a church in this place at this time.

We begin this first Sunday in Advent with the way the Bible introduces Christmas. It's a story of an old couple living in the hill country of Judah 2,000 years ago. His name is Zechariah. Her name is Elizabeth. They have no children, and that was something of an embarrassment in that time and place. In fact, there was a name for it, a cruel, harsh word: *barren,* a word used exclusively for childless women. Elizabeth and Zechariah had prayed for years for a child. Not having a child, an heir—in Zechariah's case, a son to inherit his priestly responsibilities—was grounds for divorce. Luke tells us that these are good people. They have stayed together. They love each

other. And now, over the years, they have adjusted, accommodated, accepted the status quo. They still say their evening prayers together but by silent, mutual agreement they no longer pray for a child.

Zechariah is a priest. Once a year he, along with other priests in his division, travels to Jerusalem to serve in the temple: prepare the sacrifices, light candles, burn incense, sweep the floors, I suppose, answer the phones, send out faxes and e-mails.

During their time of service, the priests on duty cast lots to decide who will perform the highest and holiest act of all—to enter the inner sanctuary, alone, light the incense at the high altar, and afterward emerge from the holy place to bless the congregation that has gathered for this high and holy occasion.

Zechariah is chosen this time. It is the honor of his life; most priests never will experience it. And while he's in there, alone, lighting the incense, something incredible happens, something unbelievable and inexplicable—an angel. Zechariah is terrified, of course, as people in the Bible always are when an angel shows up. The angel says what angels say in the Bible, "Fear not; don't be afraid. Something important, something new and wonderful is about to happen: Elizabeth will conceive. You're going to be a father! Furthermore, God has work for your child to do. Call him John, and he will prepare the way for God's own son. And, by the way, he will be the source of great joy and gladness for you."

Talk about being startled! Zechariah is stunned. Zechariah can't believe what he's seeing and hearing, and he says so. And so the angel strikes him dumb. He can't talk—which I believe turns out to be a great gift, although I do ponder the provocative idea that God here is silencing a religious professional, telling a clergyperson to stop talking for a while.

So Zechariah emerges from the Holy Place to confront the congregation waiting for his blessing, but he can't talk. It's a kind of ultimate nightmare for us: the biggest opportunity in your life and you have nothing to say; the biggest congregation ever and you forgot your sermon. Zechariah does the best he can, gesturing, motioning. Then he goes home and Elizabeth conceives.

Something similar—not exactly, but in the same genre of unlikely and unexpected pregnancies—is happening to a niece of Elizabeth's who lives in Nazareth. Mary is her name. Mary will come to visit Elizabeth and stay for six months, which is probably great company for Elizabeth since her husband can't talk. We'll think about Elizabeth and Mary next week.

Fast forward. As the angel promised, Elizabeth has her baby, a son. Family and neighbors, overjoyed for Elizabeth and Zechariah, gather for the naming, which they assume, by custom, will be for the child's father. Zechariah shakes his head, asks for a tablet, and writes, "His name is John." With that his voice returns, and his first words are a hymn of praise, the Benedictus: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people. He has raised up a mighty savior for us." And proud father that he is, his first words include a little understandable boasting about his son:

> "You child, will be called the prophet of the Most High,
> And you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways. . . .
> The dawn from on high will break upon us."

Men generally need to be very cautious about this story and about issues of conception and pregnancy and childbirth generally. I learned my lesson early in my ministry. I preached a sermon on the text from Genesis: "God has brought laughter for me," which is what another older woman, Sarah, Abraham's wife, says when she became unexpectedly pregnant. I went on and on about how wonderful it was and how joyful Sarah must have been, how happy Abraham and Sarah both were to become parents finally, and how they must have laughed a lot together. Pauline, the choir director, took me aside after church. She was older and wiser; she was the mother of two teenagers—and a two-year-old. Pauline said, "I became pregnant long after I expected to or wanted to. And while we love him dearly, at the time it was no laughing matter. Next time you talk about pregnancy, think a little bit about who might be out there in the pews." I have learned that, more than likely, there are women who are pregnant and happy and also women who are pregnant and not at all happy; and women who are not pregnant and want to be; women in the midst of the long and difficult process of fertility testing; and women struggling with the very difficult issue of whether the responsible and faithful thing to do is to end this pregnancy. In fact, I know someone who, when listening to gray-haired men pontificating about abortion, contraception, women's reproductive health generally, thinks it would be a good idea if God sent another angel to do what Gabriel did to Zechariah, namely shut them up.

I am convinced—because a woman helped me to see it—that the person who is really barren here is the man, Zechariah. Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "The commentaries call it Zechariah's sin of disbelief, but I wonder about that. You might also call it a failure of imagination, a fear of disappointment, a habit of hopelessness" (*Bread of Angels,* p. 93).

Zechariah's barrenness is that he could not imagine a future different from the present, could not envision something new. It is the barrenness of all of us when, over the years, we accommodate to the status quo and stop hoping

and expecting and planning and looking forward to the future. It is the barrenness of those for whom God is an empty concept instead of an active, powerful love always working in the world and in our lives, for our redemption.

Zechariah's barrenness is the barrenness of addiction and the refusal to see the possibilities of freedom and the courage to take the first step; the barrenness of a dying and deadening relationship and the refusal to pick up the phone and ask for help and the possibility of newness; the barrenness of vocational and career dreams long discarded and life a matter of day after day of putting in the time until retirement; the barrenness of personal hopes long abandoned.

It is the barrenness of political leaders who cannot imagine a new and better future for the children, for the sick, for the poor, for the nations. It is the barrenness of retaliation and force as the only response to our enemies. It is a failure of imagination to envision another future.

At Advent, it is a theological barrenness: a failure to imagine and hope and expect the reconciling intrusion of God into our world and into your life and mine. That is the promise of Advent. God is coming. God will come with love and healing and hope into your life, whoever you are. God will come with light into whatever darkness you find yourself in. Zechariah couldn't see it, but God was acting to redeem and renew and reconcile.

And Zechariah's silence—I have come to regard it not so much as God's punishment for his disbelief, but as God's gift. Zechariah couldn't speak about what happened in the Holy Place, and that was a favor, because he couldn't have begun to explain it. Again, I learned that from a woman. Kathleen Norris, in her book *Amazing Grace*, writes, "When the angel strikes Zechariah dumb, she gives him a pregnancy of his own. . . . I read Zechariah's punishment as a grace, in that he could not say anything to further compound his initial arrogance when confronted with mystery. When he does speak again, it is to praise God: he's had nine months to think it over."

And so I conclude that Zechariah's silence was a gift, a time to ponder the mystery, a gift of silence to savor a reality, a truth that simply will not submit to ordinary categories of thinking and explaining.

The cover article for the November 13 issue of *Time* magazine was "God vs. Science," a spirited debate between atheist biologist Richard Dawkins and Christian geneticist Francis Collins. Dawkins is an Oxford professor and author of *The God Delusion,* a best seller. Collins is Director of the National Human Genome Research Institute, head of a multinational 2,400-scientist team that has co-mapped the 3 billion letters of our genetic blueprint. He is

a Christian and author of a best seller, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief.* It is a rigorous and respectful dialogue, with Dawkins arguing that science and religion are incompatible and Collins arguing the reverse—that nothing in science is inherently opposed to the idea of God.

At the end, Collins told the interviewer that while he agreed with much of Dawkins' scientific approach, "I am still able to accept and embrace the possibility that there are answers that science is not able to provide—the questions of why instead of how."

Dawkins' last words were remarkable. Affirming his atheism, he nevertheless added, "If there is a God, it's going to be a whole lot bigger and a whole lot more incomprehensible than any theologian of any religion has ever proposed."

Exactly, and maybe that's why Zechariah was unable to speak. Some things should be pondered rather than explained. Theology should mean listening as well as teaching. Praying should be silence as well as speaking. Reality is not limited to our ability to comprehend it and analyze it and talk about it. God is greater than our capacity to understand. And so sometimes all we can do, the best we can do, is be silent.

"Let all mortal flesh keep silence," the great hymn bids us on the first Sunday of Advent.

About the same time back when I was pontificating about how wonderful it must be to be pregnant unexpectedly, I read and clipped a newspaper feature, "Quiet Christmas Club." The article itself has long since disappeared from my files, but I remember the gist of it. QCC, Quiet Christmas Club. The rules are simple. There were only two, I recall. One: no more complaining about how busy you are, how rushed and tired and overwhelmed by the responsibilities of the season. And two: Quiet. Everyday a time of silence to ponder and pray, to thank God for your blessings, your dear ones whose love is so very precious; silence in which to ponder the mystery of God, God coming into the world in the birth of a child.

How appropriate, on the First Sunday of Advent, to celebrate the Sacrament of Baptism. Parents, who in their hearts are singing something of old Zechariah's Benedictus as he holds his child in his arms: "Thanks be to God—he has looked favorably on us." In their hearts, sharing old Zechariah's hopes and desires that in the new child God's tender mercies come to us and something of God's new dawn breaks upon all of us.

Every child is God's gift of newness, of hope and possibility. At the end of his monologue on *Prairie Home Companion* last night, Garrison Keillor said that in the middle of all the seasonal hullabaloo, Christmas comes to Lake Wobegon when the schoolchildren sing Christmas carols at the local nursing home. A dozen or so elderly residents in wheelchairs, with their mortality staring them in the face, people who don't listen to much of anything these days, listen raptly as the children sing "Joy to the world, the Lord has come."

Every child is God's gift of hope—every newborn, whether we are parents or not, Elizabeth's and Zechariah's child, and another soon to be born: Mary's child, Joseph's child, God's own Son. All praise to him. Amen.